

Critical Thinking Matters

At the recent annual conference for the Association for Experiential Education in Vancouver I was involved in one of the sessions during which I was asked "why should we be encouraging critical thinking in the literature pertaining to experiential education?" It prompted me to reflect on this position further after the conference - I enjoyed spending time reflecting on this issue and trying to think critically about critical thinking! I revisited some of Brookfield's (1986) work and found some fruitful discussion. Among other things Brookfield identifies two traits of critical thinkers:

1. Identify and challenge assumptions underlying beliefs,
2. Explore and imagine alternative ways to thinking and learning.

When I re-read this work I was immediately struck by these two aims which resonated with many of the claimed aims and benefits of education out-of-doors. I was also reminded of the importance of developing critical thinking as a field in building a body of knowledge. In taking a critical perspective we can not simply be critical for the sake of being critical but rather be critical with a view to uncovering our assumptions and improving practice. Related to this, we may be able to build a more robust body of knowledge by taking a critical perspective and in doing so increase the credibility and acceptability of non-traditional or informal approaches to learning. Later in Brookfield's work he lists seven ways to develop as a critical thinker, one of which is to cultivate interests in a wide variety of related and divergent fields. It seems that this could help individuals to see various fields in the light of others perspectives and apply them, not with a view to criticising them but rather with a view to understanding the strengths and the boundaries of applicability of the work. I am, of course, picking up certain aspects of Brookfield's work which seem to be particularly pertinent and I recommend anyone interested in this area to read more of his work.

I think that taking a critical approach could prove to be very useful for developing credibility as a robust body of knowledge and as an educational practice. Despite my interest in receiving papers for review and potential publication in this journal I am also of the firm belief that we, as a field, need to write more for journals outside of the immediate field of education out-of-doors and likewise, encourage people from other fields to write for our journals. This approach could enrich our practice with groups and our understanding of the boundaries of our work.

In this vein I am pleased to present this issue of the journal and to begin with part two of Brookes' series which takes a look at one part of outdoor adventure education from a social psychology perspective. I have enjoyed working with this paper to reach publication and the reviewers have been positive about both the approach and the writing style. There is no doubt in my mind that this two part series makes a significant contribution by both illustrating a high level of critical thinking and by addressing a greatly needed subject - our assumptions and claims about transfer of learning and attribution. I suspect that reading his paper will make a number of people sit up straight in their chairs, when he observes that "the conditions that have permitted the field of OAE to take the mythology of adventure as literal truth owes something to a more general lack of intellectual curiosity and scholarly attention." As an illustration of this general enthusiasm and passion which often seems to overtake critical thought and a careful examination of ontology and epistemology, Brookes turns to a favourite subject for many researchers and marketing departments, self-esteem. Using social psychology he points out that "vulnerability to negative peer-pressure, and risk-taking such as driving too fast under the influence of alcohol, was associated with high self-esteem." Brookes uncovers a common assumption that high self-esteem is inherently desirable. Along with Michael Moore's film *Bowling for Columbine* I will be adding this to the 'essential to experience' list for students I teach.

Sibthorp provides us with empirical information collected using a qualitative approach to a sailing adventure programme. Sibthorp makes some important observations both on the field of outdoor adventure education from the literature and the information he has collected. He rightly points out that without an understanding of the underlying processes "designing optimal programs will remain an enigmatic hit and miss proposition." While this may be axiomatic to some, my own experiences and interactions would indicate that this remains an issue in need of attention. The theoretical framework that Sibthorp presents helps to illustrate the complexity of outdoor education and in doing so makes an implicit case for studying 'what is' rather than 'what might be' or 'what could be' by oversimplifying what seems to me to be both the strength and challenge for research in this field. There are also some surprising findings in this study which scream at researchers for further attention, the most obvious to me is that "there was limited support for the educational value of either the countries visited or the natural environment."

The third paper in this issue takes an approach that is new to the journal. Storry presents a part factual and part fictional narrative to illustrate motivations for those working in the field, particularly focusing on mountaineering. I have read this paper a number of times and with every reading find another message intertwined. One part which appealed to me was the continuum of intrinsic and extrinsic orientations. This balance and the internal reflection that it can trigger can lead to some rich insights and developments in self-awareness. This sits closely with the work of MacIntyre (1981), a contemporary philosopher who refers to internal and external goods as motivations and a context for developing morally rich communities. In the final paragraph, Storry makes an astute observation, "Although our perception of motivation is as tangled together as a jumble of ropes, it is possible to distinguish four distinct reasons for adventuring in the outdoors, and anyone wishing to work or play in this area is wise to be self-conscious of them."

Hovelynck and Peeters address an aspect of practice that has been, surprisingly, overlooked: the role of humour. In this paper they present four aspects of humour which can either assist or interfere with a learning process. I found that the summary tables helped me to understand the structure of humour and this has proved beneficial as a framework for analysis when working with students. One point which resonates for me is that when humour is used functionally it often fails to be funny or helpful, they note, "An initiator who 'applies' humor can at best expect that the audience applies laughter. An initiator who spontaneously jokes may get a genuine response, and this may contribute to the quality of the relationship."

Stott and Hall report on an expedition to North East Greenland where they studied 70 young adults. In this quintessentially British tradition of expeditioning (which has seen considerable growth in the past two decades) Stott and Hall draw on the range of experiences to examine the kind of experiences which may contribute to learning that is meaningful and useful to life back at home. Interestingly and complementing Sibthorps' work they tend to focus on the development of social skills observing that some of the learning "may be beneficial to future groups in which individuals find themselves." However, they are careful to remind readers that "it is more difficult to see how changes in participants' social or soft skills and meta-skills (judgement skills) can be measured".

In the latter pages of the journal you will find a collection of book reviews. Thanks to Dave Hardy for all his work in taking on this task and for providing us with reviews of a wide collection of books and conference proceedings to aid readers in selecting how to spend their money.

In an earlier issue Joe Gibson presented the first paper in a series called 'country focus'. We planned to have a second paper in this issue but unfortunately there have been some delays. However, in the coming issues we intend to continue this feature and are working on papers about, among others, Canada, Hong Kong, Sweden and Japan.

Finally, as always, it is a pleasure to introduce this issue of the journal, I would also like to encourage readers to put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboards) and write to me about the papers, let me know if there are issues that you want to comment on, gain some clarification on or contest. I can include a section of 'letters to the editor' or, for those with more to say, I

can include shorter discussion pieces from as little as 500 words. Most of all I want to thank all of the authors and people involved in producing this issue of the journal; I hope you enjoy it.

References

- Brookfield, S. D. (1986) *Understanding and facilitating adult learning: A comprehensive analysis of principles and effective practices*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- MacIntyre, A. (1981) *After virtue*. Kings Lynn: Duckworth.